

# Some Things Are Better Left Unsaid: African American Male High School Students' Perceptions of School Counseling Services

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*This article describes the results of a descriptive study implemented to examine African American male students' perceptions of school counselors and the services they offer. The sample consisted of 215 students in grades 9 through 12. Results indicated that the majority of students were aware that their school provided school counseling services; however, a low percentage of students indicated that they perceived school counselors to be "trustworthy," "friendly," or "accessible." While over half of respondents agreed that the role of school counselors was to assist with academic problems and scheduling classes, only one-third agreed that school counselors were there to assist students with personal, social, and emotional issues. Implications for further research are presented.*

The increasing attention given to understanding the characteristics and circumstances that result in lower levels of academic performance and expectations among African American male K-12 students (as opposed to their White counterparts) has led researchers to look beyond the confines of the classroom to see what else accounts for these noticeable differences. Some argue that differential achievement is due, in part, to other in-school factors affecting Black males (e.g., peer dynamics, interactions with staff, institutional culture) (Uwah, McMahon, & Furlow, 2008). One area of emerging concern, are student-counselor dynamics. This dynamic is the focus of this study, which aims to better understand Black males involvement with school counselors and their use of school counseling services.

More descriptive research and exploratory studies are needed to better understand this connection and how African American males perceive school counseling services as well as why they use some services more often than others (Moore et al., 2009). Though the educational plight of African American males (e.g., lack of inclusion, high levels of underachievement) are not new phenomena, challenges facing this sub-group have reemerged as growing problems which call for immediate attention from policymaker, educators, and researchers (Henfield, Moore, & Wood, 2008; Heinfield, Owens, & Moore 2008; Jackson & Moore, 2008).

In the litany of previous literature, a great deal of attention has been paid to understanding the correlates of success and academic achievement among disadvantaged students and ethnic/racial minority

students (American Council of Education, 2006; Council for Exceptional Children, 2002; Ferguson, 2001; Gallant & Moore, 2008; Garibaldi, 2007; Pitts, 2009; Power & Arriola, 2003). Research has shown that there are psychological, social, and environmental factors that make African American male academic achievement a concern. Some scholars have argued that due to the fact that academic achievement is inconsistent with cultural stereotypes, Black teenagers at certain stages of identity development may reject academic success in order to not to be perceived as trying to “act White” by their peers (Tatum, 1997; Ogbu, 1990).

Given the history of inequitable schooling, as well as persistent concentration in disadvantaged schools, the African American community has justifiable cause to be concerned about problems in education. For example, African American male students remain behind whites in achievement scores (Campbell et al., 2000; Grissmer & Flanagan, 2001; Lee 2002; Lubienski, 2002) and graduation rates at an average rate of 24.7 percentage points nationally (Orfield et al., 2004). As a result of these data, researchers continue to actively debate the high rates of academic failure amongst African American males.

While numerous factors (e.g., cultural misunderstandings, deficit thinking) have been extended as leading to low success among this population, low expectations of school staff are a consistent focus among critics (Uwah, McMahon, & Furlow, 2008). For example, in relation to school counseling, a quality relationship between the counselor and student is critical, but it may be especially important for African American males (Bailey & Moore, 2004; Moore, 2000; Moore et al., 2008). School counselors who are culturally competent and able to communicate high expectations are more likely to foster meaningful relationships with African American male students (Moore et al., 2005; Moore, 2006). When school counselors are not culturally competent and not able to communicate high expectations, African American males are often negatively impacted (Moore & Owens, 2008).

However, it is important to note that African American males, generally, are reluctant or less likely to utilize counseling services (Moore, 2000, 2006; Moore et al., 2008), including mental health and school counseling services. Negative perceptions and expectations of counseling are common explanations for their underutilization of these services (Flowers et al., 2003; Howard, 2003; Moore, 2006; Moore et al., 2008). In spite of these negative perceptions, school counselors are uniquely positioned to positively affect African American male students’ academic performance, career development, and social-emotional growth (Martin, 2002; Moore & Owens, 2007). In particular, student growth and development is fostered by utilization of counseling services, such as study skills, test taking, and time management (Moore et al. 2005).

### **Purpose and Significance of the Study**

This study used survey data to examine African American male students’ perceptions of school counselors and the services they offer, and how these perceptions affect their utilization of school counseling services. School counselors have the ability to ensure student success, both personally and academically (Moore et al., 2005; Moore, 2006). Ideally, the services offered by school counselors could be essential components to their respective schools and the success of African American male students. Therefore it is imperative that educators understand how African American males perceive school counselors and the array of counseling services that they offer. The following research questions were investigated: (a) How do African American male students perceive school counselors and school counseling services?, and (b) What affect does African American male students’ perceptions have on their use of school counseling services?

### **Method**

#### **Research Design and Participants**

This descriptive study used extant survey data collected as part of an evaluation of high school counseling services in a large, urban school district located in the southeastern United States. The

evaluation consisted of administering a cross-sectional survey to high school students in grades 9 through 12. The original data file consisted of responses from 701 students in grades 9 through 12. Respondents were enrolled in an English course in the spring of 2008 at one of the county's eight traditional high schools. Lead school counselors at each of the eight high schools selected one English class from each grade level to administer the questionnaire. The selection process was not random. After each English class was selected, the survey instrument was administered to all students in the class.

This study uses the responses of the 215 African American male students in grades 9 through 12 who were included in the study. Demographic characteristics of the African American males were as follows: approximately 96% reported English as their primary language, approximately 68% qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, most (44.9%) reported earning mostly B's in school, and approximately 81% reported working towards a college preparatory diploma.

### **Instrument**

The questionnaire used in the original evaluation was developed at a large Midwestern university and designed to assess students' perceptions of school counseling services. The questionnaire consists of 64 items measuring four constructs: (a) availability of school counseling services (8 items), (b) utilization of services (18 items), (c) satisfaction with services (6 items), and (d) perceptions of school counseling (32 items) (Gallant & Zhao, 2011). All items on the questionnaire required a categorical response. That is, some items require a response of *disagree*, *somewhat disagree*, *somewhat agree*, or *agree*; while other items require a response of *very unhelpful*, *somewhat unhelpful*, *somewhat helpful*, or *very helpful*. For the current study, the 32 items related to perceptions of school counseling were of interest. Examples of the 32 items related to perceptions of school counseling can be found in the appendix.

Validity and reliability evidence was obtained for the instrument. A review of the instrument by both the director of school counseling services at the school district in which the evaluation was conducted and the school counseling professor at the large Midwestern university from whom the survey was acquired. Their insight was provided in order to pursue content validity for the instrument prior to its administration (Gallant & Zhao, 2011). For the subscales used in this study, internal consistency reliability, as measured by Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ), was as follows: beliefs regarding school counselors ( $\alpha = .91$ ,  $n = 213$ , 5 items), roles of school counselors ( $\alpha = .87$ ,  $n = 202$ , 12 items), beliefs regarding others' view of school counselors ( $\alpha = .78$ ,  $n = 205$ , 4 items), and consultation for specific problems or concerns ( $\alpha = .69$ ,  $n = 189$ , 4 items). Although the internal consistency reliability for the consultation for specific problems or concerns subscale was slightly below .70, the results of participants' responses are included in this study. Readers are cautioned when interpreting the findings.

### **Data Analysis**

This study was descriptive in nature. Thus, data analysis consisted of computing frequencies and percentages for items on the questionnaire related to perceptions of school counseling. Results are reported in tables and reflect collective responses across grade levels. Thus, individual grade level results were not of interest. The following section presents the results from this analysis.

## **Results**

### **Belief Regarding School Counselors**

Table 1 shows the frequencies and percentages of respondents' level of agreement with statements regarding beliefs about school counselors. As reflected in the table, the percentage of respondents who agreed with statements ranged from 44.4% to 53.9%. Over 50% of respondents indicated that they agreed that their school counselor is "knowledgeable" or "helpful." Less than half of

African American male respondents indicated that they believed their school counselor is “trustworthy,” “friendly,” or “accessible.”

Table 1  
*Frequency (and Percentage) of African American Male High School Students’ Responses to Belief Regarding School Counselors*

Statement	<i>n</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>
I believe that the school counselor(s) is/are trustworthy.	214	19(8.9%)	19(8.9%)	73(34.1%)	103(48.1%)
I believe that the school counselor(s) is/are friendly.	214	15(7.0%)	23(10.7%)	72(33.6%)	104(48.6%)
I believe that the school counselor(s) is/are knowledgeable.	214	14(6.5%)	14(6.5%)	71(33.2%)	115(53.7%)
I believe that the school counselor(s) is/are accessible.	214	23(10.7%)	30(14.0%)	66(30.8%)	95(44.4%)
I believe that the school counselor(s) is/are helpful.	213	17(8.0%)	21(9.9%)	60(28.2%)	115(53.9%)

### **Roles of School Counselors**

When asked “Which individual(s), if any, have been influential in encouraging you to use the school counseling services?” at least 50% of African American male respondents indicated parents, teachers, and self. Less than 30% of respondents indicated principals, administrators, or peers. Additional frequencies and percentages of responses to the role of counselors at the schools are shown in Table 2. Over half of respondents agreed that the role of school counselors is to “assist with academic problems” and “assist with scheduling classes.” Furthermore, over half of respondents disagreed that school counselors “are a waste of time.”

Table 2  
*Frequency (and Percentage) of African American Male High School Students’ Responses to the Role of School Counselors at Their School*

Statement	<i>n</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>
School counselors assist students with academic problems.	212	17(8.0%)	16(7.5%)	68(32.1%)	111(52.4%)
School counselors are involved in testing for students.	213	20(9.4%)	15(7.0%)	86(40.4%)	92(43.2%)
School counselors are involved in interventions for students.	213	25(11.7%)	33(15.5%)	88(41.3%)	67(31.5%)
School counselors meet with teachers, if necessary.	213	31(14.6%)	30(14.1%)	71(33.3%)	81(38.0%)
School counselors meet with parents, if necessary.	214	22(10.3%)	21(9.8%)	77(36.0%)	94(43.9%)
School counselors are a waste of time.	214	118(55.1%)	41(19.2%)	38(17.8%)	17(7.9%)
School counselors assist students with career choices.	212	22(10.4%)	25(11.8%)	78(36.8%)	87(41.0%)
School counselors only talk to students when they are failing in school.	214	70(32.7%)	49(22.9%)	56(26.2%)	39(18.2%)

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School counselors assist students with scheduling classes.	213	16(7.5%)	24(11.3%)	54(25.4%)	119(55.9%)
School counselors only help students who make good grades.	214	103(48.1%)	53(24.8%)	35(16.4%)	23(10.7%)
School counselors assist students with emotional issues.	210	34(16.2%)	27(12.9%)	70(33.3%)	79(37.6%)
School counselors keep secrets unless you or someone else is in danger.	208	44(21.1%)	31(14.9%)	70(33.7%)	63(30.3%)

## Belief Regarding Others' View of School Counselors

Presented in Table 3 are the frequencies and percentages of African American male responses to how they believe other people view school counseling services. Over half of respondents believe that teachers and principals view school counseling services as "very helpful to students" whereas about 47% of respondents believe that parents view school counseling services as "very helpful to students." Only 19.3% of respondents indicated that they believe that peers view school counseling services as "very helpful to students."

Table 3

*Frequency (and Percentage) of African American Male High School Students' Responses to How They Believe Others Perceive School Counseling Services*

Statement	<i>n</i>	<i>Very Unhelpful</i>	<i>Somewhat Unhelpful</i>	<i>Somewhat Helpful</i>	<i>Very Helpful</i>
Parents think counselors are	209	23(11.0%)	20(9.6%)	68(32.5%)	98(46.9%)
Teachers think counselors are	210	13(6.2%)	19(9.0%)	55(26.2%)	123(58.6%)
Principals think counselors are	208	11(5.3%)	12(5.8%)	34(16.3%)	151(72.6%)
Peers think counselors are	207	36(17.4%)	51(24.6%)	80(38.7%)	40(19.3%)

## Consultation for Specific Problems or Concerns

Table 4 shows frequencies and percentages of responses to individuals that African American males go to with specific problems and/or concerns. For academic concerns, the majority (55.6%) of African American males indicated that they go to teachers. For college preparation concerns, a higher percentage (34.3%) of African American males indicated that they would go to parents instead of teachers, principals, peers, no one, or other. Similarly, for career and personal, social, or emotional concerns, a higher percentage (47.3% and 46.6%, respectively for career and personal, social, or emotional concerns) of African American males indicated that they would go to parents instead of teachers, principals, peers, no one, or other.

Table 4

*Frequency (and Percentage) of African American Male High School Students' Responses to Whom They Would Go To With Specific Concerns*

Concern	<i>n</i>	<i>Parents</i>	<i>Teachers</i>	<i>Principal</i>	<i>Peer</i>	<i>Self</i>	<i>Other</i>
Academic	196	41(20.9%)	109(55.6%)	9(4.6%)	10(5.1%)	21(10.7%)	6(3.1%)
College Preparation	204	70(34.3%)	62(30.4%)	15(7.4%)	6(2.9%)	23(11.3%)	28(13.7%)
Career	201	95(47.3%)	32(15.9%)	8(3.9%)	4(2.0%)	42(20.9%)	20(10.0%)
Personal, Social, or Emotional	204	95(46.6%)	7(3.4%)	7(3.4%)	34(16.7%)	50(24.5%)	11(5.4%)

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate African American male students' perceptions of school counselors, the services they offer, and the utilization of school counseling services. Based on the preliminary findings, the majority of the African American males believed that their school counselors were "knowledgeable" or "helpful;" however, less than half of them indicated that they believed their school counselor to be "trustworthy," "friendly," or "accessible."

Additionally, it seems that students have a limited understanding of the various functions of counselors. Over half of respondents agreed that the role of school counselors was to assist with academic problems and scheduling classes, and just over one-third agreed that school counselors were there to assist students with personal, social, and emotional issues. Perhaps, these data illustrate why so many students believed their school counselors to be "knowledgeable" and "helpful" because they were able to assist with academic issues, while not finding them "trustworthy", "friendly", or "accessible" because of their lack of perceived assistance with personal, social, and emotional issues. These findings are closely aligned with Moore's et al. (2008) study. The authors asserted "school counselors should be cognizant of African American male students' concerns regarding the invisibility and responsibility of school counselors. It is imperative that they be proactive about developing innovative ways to make their presence felt throughout the school" (p. 921). Results infer a need for more research which explores cultural barriers and stigmas of African American male students in terms of school counseling.

The current study also finds that although over half of respondents view school counseling services as "very helpful to students," a much smaller portion (19%) reported the belief that their peers view school counseling services as "very helpful for students." This finding suggests that African American male students and their peers possibly do not find school counseling services to be beneficial to them because: a) they are excelling academically; or b) they do not foresee graduating from high school and/or attending college as viable options.

Although over half of the students in this study indicated that they believed teachers and principals viewed school counseling services as very helpful, and almost half (47%) believed that parents felt the same, only 3% indicated that they would visit the school counselor for academic concerns, and only 14% and 10% indicated that that would visit the school counselor for college preparation and career concerns, respectively. Even more startling, only 5% of the respondents indicated that they would go to the school counselor concerning personal, social, and emotional issues. With the abundance of academic, social, personal, and communal concerns that African American males have to contend with inside and outside of the scholastic arena, it is unfortunate that the majority of the students in this study did not believe that they could use school counseling services for personal, social, and emotional concerns. This is consistent with previous literature that has found that African American males, generally, are reluctant or less likely to utilize non-academic counseling services (Moore, 2000, 2006; Moore et al., 2008), including mental health and school counseling services. This underutilization may be a result of African American males' negative perceptions, stigma, and expectations of counseling (Flowers et al., 2003; Howard, 2003; Moore, 2006; Moore et al., 2008). Therefore, systematic changes must be initiated to counter the negative perceptions and expectations of school counselors and school counseling services.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of the current study can be used to spark a dialogue amongst key stakeholders (e.g., parents, teachers, counselors, school administrators, superintendents, etc.) regarding the use, and perception, of school counseling services by African American male students. More specifically, more descriptive research and exploratory studies (i.e. focus groups, in-depth interviews, etc.) should be conducted to better understand African American male students' underutilization of school counseling services. These studies should focus on how African American culture interacts, both positively and negatively, with educational systems, resulting in lower usage of counseling services (Flowers et al., 2003). Having this understanding is likely to help school counselors better align their programs and

services with the needs of this student population which could result in increased motivation, engagement, and achievement in academics for African American males

### **Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

To initiate a change that will have a positive impact on African American males' perceptions and expectations of school counselors and the services they offer, as well as the utilization of these services, school counselors' understanding of these perceptions are critical in building a system of trust and confidence with these students. If school counselors do not understand the affect, both positive and negative, that the African American culture has on school systems and subsequently school counseling services (Flowers et. al, 2003), the gap between services provided and African American male students' use of the services will continue to increase. The following recommendations are meant to contribute to the conversation on how school counselors can strengthen their relationship, and interaction, with the aforementioned population.

1. School counselors should create various opportunities outside of regular school day hours to assist male students of color. This would allow for these students to visit with school counselors without fear of being seen and stigmatized by their peers.
2. School counselors should provide activities, assemblies, and fairs that increase students' awareness of services and reduce stigma associated with services.
3. School counselors should partner with outside agencies to offer services on weekends, before school, and/or after school.
4. School counselors should create parent seminars to enlighten parents on services offered and to familiarize them with processes and procedures that their children may partake in.
5. School counselors should create a weekly newsletter with tips that students may find useful related to social, personal, and emotional well-being.

These recommendations alone will not rectify the situation pertaining to the dissonance between African American males and their perceptions of school counseling services. However, they can serve as building blocks for larger, more in-depth, approaches to the situation. If school counselors implement these suggestions on a continual basis, African American male students could be the much-needed beneficiaries.

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## Appendix

### Perceptions of School Counseling

1. Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements:  
  
*"I believe that the school counselor(s) is/are..."*
  - a. *Trustworthy.*"
  - b. *Friendly.*"
  - c. *Knowledgeable.*"
  - d. *Accessible.*"
  - e. *Helpful.*"
  
2. Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement regarding the role(s) of the counselor(s) at your school.  
School counselors:
  - a. assist students with academic problems.
  - b. are involved in testing for students.
  - c. are involved in interventions for students.
  - d. meet with teachers, if necessary.
  - e. meet with parents, if necessary.
  - f. are a waste of time.
  - g. assist students with career choices.
  - h. only talk to students when they are failing in school.
  - i. assist students with scheduling classes.
  - j. only help students who make good grades.
  - k. assist students with emotional issues.
  - l. keep secrets unless you or someone else is in danger.
  
3. Which individual(s), if any, have been influential in encouraging you to use the school counseling services?
  - a. Parents
  - b. Teachers
  - c. Principals and/or Administrators
  - d. Peers
  - e. Self
  - f. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
  - g. N/A- No one
  
4. How do you believe other people view school counseling services?
  - a. Parents think counselors are...
  - b. Teachers think counselors are...
  - c. Principals think counselors are...
  - d. Peers think counselors are...
  
5. If you had a problem or concern, which **one** individual would you be most likely to go to? (Parents, Teachers, Principal, Peers, Other)
  - a. Academic
  - b. College preparation
  - c. Career
  - d. Personal, social, or emotional